

# Socratic and Platonic Ethics

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## *Ethics and Political Philosophy*

- The first part of the course is a brief survey of important texts in the history of ethics and political philosophy.
- Ethics is a normative discipline, which primarily concerns the evaluation of human behavior.
- Historically, two broad questions are asked:
  - What makes a person a *good* or a *bad* person?
  - What makes a human action *right* or *wrong*?
- Closely connected with ethics is political philosophy, which deals with such questions as:
  - How *ought* society to be organized?
  - What makes the actions of a society or of individuals *just* or *unjust*?
- These questions were asked by the ancient philosophers and remain of vital interest today.

## *Ancient Ethics and Political Philosophy*

- The fundamental practical issue for the ancient philosophers was how to attain the good life.
- There were two main candidates as answers to that question:
  - Through virtue or excellence of character, thought, and action (*arete*),
  - Through a state of either happiness (*eudaimonia*) or pleasure (*hedone*).
- Generally, it was thought that virtue and happiness are closely related, while virtue and pleasure are not.
- If this is so, then happiness and pleasure are two distinct kinds of states.
- The larger question was how individual virtue, happiness, or pleasure are related to norms such as justice and injustice that apply to society.

### *Socrates: The Man of Virtue*

- The first ancient philosopher to undertake a comprehensive investigation of virtue was Socrates.
- Socrates described his behavior as a response to a divine voice (*daimon*) within him and to an utterance by the Delphic Oracle.
- His philosophical goal was to seek the truth through the interrogation of people alleged to be wise.
- His practical goal was to teach that each person should attain the best possible state of the soul, which would entail being as virtuous as possible.
- According to Aristotle, Socrates believed that our actions always aim at the best and fail to attain it only because we are ignorant of what the best is.
- Socrates's commitment to virtue was so strong that he accepted an unjust sentence of death rather than escaping into exile.

### *The Sophists*

- Although Socrates tried to expose the pretensions to knowledge of everyone he came across, he was especially hostile toward the Sophists.
- The Sophists were professional teachers of rhetoric, whose aim was to train young people to debate in the political arena.
- One boast of the Sophists was that they could make the worse argument appear better than the better argument.
- Socrates charged that the Sophists trained their students to advance their own interests, even by arguing for falsehoods.
- By promoting ignorance, the Sophists promoted actions which are not aimed at what is best.
- In this way, the influence of the Sophists was to turn people away from virtue.

### *The Priority of Virtue*

- In contrast to the Sophists, Socrates tried to turn people toward virtue.
- His message was that one should care most strongly for the best possible state of the soul, rather than for wealth or bodily pleasure.
- Wealth and other goods that a person pursues do not make the person virtuous when they are attained.

- “Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively” (*Apology* 30b).
- The virtuous person cannot be harmed, as the only real harm is the loss of virtue.

### *An Injustice*

- Socrates was accused of crimes against the city of Athens, convicted by a jury, and sentenced to death.
- He regarded his conviction as wrongful, as he thought he had proved that the charges against him were unfounded.
- He claimed that the only reason for his conviction was his own refusal to beg for the jury’s mercy.
- Had he done so, he would have brought shame on himself.
- In fact, it was the jury that brought shame on itself by treating him unjustly.
- The jury would reap the consequences of its actions:
  - Socrates’s followers would be emboldened to act against members of the jury,
  - The jury members would lose out on the opportunity to improve themselves with the help of Socrates.
- The second item is an example of the famous Socratic irony.

### *Death*

- Socrates faced death resolutely, due to his belief that the virtuous person cannot be harmed.
- He proposed a *dilemma* which shows the harmlessness of death.
- Death is either:
  - A dreamless sleep, or
  - A passage to another life.
- A dreamless sleep is desirable, not harmful.
- The virtuous person who passes on to another life would find justice there and would associate with other virtuous souls.

### *The Social Dimension of Virtue*

- Excellence of the soul seems to be an entirely personal matter.
- Socrates argues that the opinions of others are irrelevant to whether one is acting from virtue or not.
- The virtuous person cannot be harmed by the actions of others, no matter what their opinion of him.
- The only harm another can do is to lead one away from virtue.
- In looking to others for guidance in action, one should look to those who have knowledge of virtue.
  - By analogy, an athlete should look for guidance from a trainer or a physician.
- What should guide our actions is not how non-virtuous people think we should behave, but whether the actions themselves are right or wrong, just or unjust.

### *Unjust Actions*

- Suppose someone, or some group of people, has behaved unjustly toward a person.
  - A case in point is Socrates's conviction and death-sentence.
- The injustice of the act does not justify an unjust act in return.
  - Socrates should not avoid death by escape and exile if such behavior would be unjust.
- In general, no consequences of an unjust action, however favorable, make it acceptable to perform it.
- So the issue facing Socrates is whether avoiding the death penalty by escape is indeed unjust.

### *Bad Consequences*

- Socrates argues in the specific case of his escape that the consequences would not in fact be favorable.
  - His friends will be put into danger by helping him escape,
  - He will be received as an enemy of the law,

- If he finds a lawless state that would accept him, his life would not be worth living there,
- His conviction would be vindicated, as his escape would prove that he was not teaching virtue,
- He would be disgraced by acting in a cowardly way.
- On the other hand, no real harm will be done if he does not escape.
  - As a virtuous person, he cannot be harmed,
  - No harm would come to his family members, as friends would look after them.

#### *Justice and Agreement*

- But as stated above, the consequences of his escape should not be the basis of his decision.
- The question is whether to escape is to act unjustly.
- Socrates argues that to escape would be to violate a just agreement, and to violate a just agreement is always unjust.
- The agreement in his case is to follow the laws of the city.
- So even if the laws are executed in an unjust way, they must still be followed.

#### *The Social Contract*

- Socrates did not make an explicit agreement with the city of Athens to obey its laws.
- His agreement was a tacit one, which is now called a “social contract.”
  - He stayed in the city,
  - Yet he could have left at any time with all his property.
- Moreover, he received benefits from his tacit agreement with the city, e.g., his education.
- It was also in his power to argue for better laws, so the laws of the city are not oppressive in any way.

### *Socrates and Modern Political Thought*

- Social contract theories have been used by many modern philosophers to justify the application of laws to members of society.
- In the mid-twentieth century, such thinkers as Ghandi and King have claimed that it is just to disobey unjust laws, or laws that are enforced unjustly.
- There may be a way to reconcile this attitude with Socrates's argument that it is unjust to disobey the laws of the city.
- The indigenous people of India and the African-Americans were not related to the laws in the same way Socrates was:
  - The laws were oppressive, in that these people were in no position to influence the legislative process.
- The difference in the two situations can be made vivid by considering whether a slave in ancient Athens was party to any kind of social contract.

### *Beyond Socratic Ethics*

- Socrates maintained several theses in ethical and political philosophy:
  - People ought to act only from virtue,
  - It is never right to respond to injustice with further injustice,
  - A virtuous person can be harmed only by a loss of virtue,
  - People have obligations to obey the laws of a state with which they have voluntarily associated themselves.
- But the *Apology* and *Crito* leave a number of central questions unanswered, including the following:
  - What makes a person virtuous?
  - What makes an act just or unjust?
  - How should society be organized in a virtuous or excellent way?
- Plato began to supply answers to these questions.

### *Plato's Meno*

- In the dialogue *Meno*, Plato elaborates on the nature of virtue.
- He describes virtue as composed of "parts," which include:

- Justice,
- Temperance,
- Piety.
- Socrates looks for a common character which all the individual virtues have in common.
- He fails to get a positive answer to the question.
- He advances a negative argument to the conclusion that virtue is not a kind of knowledge, and that accordingly it cannot be taught.
- Based on that reasoning, he concludes that virtue is given to us by the gods.
- But he notes that the issue of the origin of virtue cannot be resolved until it is discovered what virtue is.

#### *Plato's Republic*

- Plato's *Republic* is a comprehensive work of political philosophy.
- Its main goal is to determine the best possible form of government.
- The conclusions reached there are important in themselves, but they also shed light on the common character of virtue.
- In Book I of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates ask what justice (one of the virtues) is.
- He gets a number of unsatisfactory responses before giving his own account.

#### *Justice as Rendering to Each His Due*

- The first account of justice is given by Simonides and Polemarchus:
  - Justice is to give to each person what is due to him.
  - For example, it is just to repay one's debts to another.
- This account is easily refuted, since it is not just to return weapons to someone who has gone insane since they were borrowed.
- Polemarchus revises the account by explaining what "due" means:
  - Justice is to give to each person what he deserves.
- What someone deserves from me depends on my relationship to him:
  - A friend deserves benefits from me,
  - An enemy deserves harm from me.

### *The Defeat of the First Account of Justice*

- Socrates refutes the revised first account of justice in several ways.
- It is possible to be wrong about who is one's friend and who is one's enemy, in which case one could act unjustly when he thought he was acting justly.
- This leads to a second revision of the first account:
  - Justice is to benefit the just and harm the unjust.
- Socrates then argues that it is never just to harm anyone.
  1. Harming something make something less excellent with respect to the kind of thing it is.
  2. Justice is "the specific virtue" of a person.
  3. So, harming a person makes him less excellent with respect to justice.
  4. A just person would not make another person less just.
  5. So, a just person would not harm another person.

### *Justice as the Advantage of the Stronger*

- The second account of justice is given by Thrasymachus.
  - Justice is what benefits the stronger.
- Specifically, the stronger are those in power in a state, so that:
  - Obeying the laws set down by those in power for their own benefit is just.
- An initial problem for this view is that the rulers may mistake what is for their own benefit, and so obedience to their laws will not benefit them.

### *The Craft of Ruling*

- Thrasymachus replies that a ruler does not make a mistake when he is acting as a ruler.
- Ruling is a craft, and insofar as one practices the craft, one does so correctly.
  - A doctor does not act as a doctor when he harms a patient.
- So in practicing the craft of ruling, rulers enact laws that really do benefit them, and obeying these laws is just.
- Socrates's further response to Thrasymachus exploits the claim that ruling is a craft.



- The important point is that what is advantageous to one acting as a craftsman is to accomplish the ends of the craft.
  - It is advantageous to the doctor, when acting as a doctor, to cure his patients.
- And the end of the craft of ruling is to build a healthy state, and not to attain personal advantage.

#### *What Justice Is*

- The rulers of a state act justly when they act for the advantage of those they rule.
- To do so, the rulers must act wisely, from which Socrates concludes that justice is wisdom in ruling.
- Justice, then, is wise rule for the advantage of those who are ruled.
- Moreover, justice is more effective than is injustice.
  - A band of thieves that treated one another unjustly would not be able to accomplish much.
- Socrates ends the discussion with Thrasymachus by noting that the just soul, in carrying out its functions wisely, will live well and be blessed and happy.

#### *Three Kinds of Value*

- There are three ways in which any kind of behavior might have value.
- It may be *intrinsically* valuable, or valued for its own sake.
- It may be *instrumentally* valuable, or valued for the sake of something else.
- It may be both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable.
- Socrates believes that justice is something that is valuable both intrinsically and instrumentally.

#### *Is Injustice More Valuable Than Justice?*

- Glaucon proposes an argument to the effect that justice has instrumental value only.
- He contends that people behave justly only when they are in a position of weakness.

- Injustice is the natural state of people, because of their desire to get more and more.
  - Someone with an instrument that would make them powerful (like the ring of Gyges) would use it unjustly.
- Glaucon's brother Adeimantus notes many ways in which people recognize the advantages of injustice.

#### *Civic and Individual Justice*

- Socrates undertakes to answer Glaucon and Adeimantus in an indirect way.
- He considers the effects of justice on a city.
- He finds that justice is advantageous to the city.
- He then compares features of the city to those of the soul.
- His conclusion is that acting justly is to be valued for its own sake.

#### *Civic Harmony*

- The city exists because people must work together in order to achieve their ends.
- If a city is to function well, its citizens must take on specific roles and perform them well.
- To this end, people in the city should be trained in carrying out their roles.
- The rulers of the city must be trained as philosophers.
  - Only philosophers have the wisdom to reconcile the high spirits needed to rule with the gentleness that must be shown toward those who are ruled.
- Thus the city functions best when it is under the guidance of wise rulers who act with the best interests of those they rule at heart.

#### *The Virtues of the Soul*

- In Book IV, Socrates argues that the just soul will resemble the justly-ruled city.
- The city contains many individuals with different functions which must be coordinated by the rulers.
- The soul contains several parts which must be brought into harmony for it to achieve excellence.

- The emotional,
  - The willful,
  - The rational.
- Each of these parts of the soul has its own virtue or excellence:
  - The emotional: temperance,
  - The willful: courage,
  - The rational: wisdom.
- The virtue of justice is the co-ordination of the parts of the soul, under the guidance of the rational part.